

## **Spring Testing Time:**

### ***With Preparation, Students and Parents can Survive SOLs***

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It is springtime in Virginia. Flowers are blooming, lawn mowers are humming, and in classrooms across the state, children are taking or preparing for Standards of Learning tests.

Most of the 2.1 million SOL tests Virginia administers annually are given in the spring. The tests assess whether students have achieved minimum levels of competence in English, mathematics, science, and social studies.

Parents often ask me what they can do to help their children succeed on the tests. They sometimes are surprised by the advice I offer.

If a parent seems particularly anxious about the upcoming tests, the first thing I suggest is that they calm down – especially if the child is in elementary or middle school. It has been my experience that parents often experience more anxiety than their children do about the tests. Frequently, this anxiety is caused by misinformation about the testing program.

Indeed, most students in Virginia and elsewhere seem to take annual testing in stride. Last month, Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit public opinion research organization issued its latest “Reality Check” report on public education. Public Agenda’s findings sharply contradict the picture opponents of the standards movement paint of schools full of children stressed to the point of needing medication.

### **Only A Few Stressed Out**

More than half of the middle- and high-school students surveyed disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their school places far too much emphasis on standardized test scores. When asked if they get nervous at test time, 23 percent said no, 73 percent admitted feeling some jitters but nothing they couldn’t handle, and only 4 percent claimed to get so nervous they were unable to take a test.

Students also were asked whether they think they have to take too many standardized tests. Seventy-one percent said the number of tests they have to take is “about right.” Add the 4 percent who said they believe that they aren’t tested enough (!) and we see that 75 percent of the students polled disagree with the suggestion that they are being over tested.

While the Public Agenda poll found that many teachers, parents, and professors worry about teaching to the test, only about one-quarter of the teachers surveyed actually claim to be doing it. It is unclear what is meant by “teaching to the test.” In Virginia, a teacher can’t teach to a SOL test because the teacher does not know in advance the specific questions on the test. What the teacher *can* do is make sure he or she has covered the content of the standards. This is not teaching to the test – this is teaching the material that is tested, something teachers always have done.

## **How Parents Can Help**

But back to parents and how they can help their children prepare for testing. No crash course in test-taking strategies or motivational exercise will guarantee a passing mark if a child doesn’t know and understand the material. The best way for parents to help their children pass the tests is to be involved in their schoolwork – starting with the first bell in August or September. Check homework, encourage good study habits, and cooperate with teachers. Do the things good parents always have done to help children succeed, and then, when test time comes along, make sure children arrive at school rested and alert.

In fairness to parents, it is important to note that the anxiety some parents feel about the tests is a reflection of the stress their children experience because of ill-considered motivational strategies sometimes employed by schools. While it is important to establish a “can-do” attitude, schools must be careful that children are not needlessly stressed or given misinformation about the consequences of their performance on the tests. SOL pep rallies and other techniques some schools employ to get kids “psyched up” for the tests often do more harm than good.

Fortunately, most school divisions seem to be abandoning the “big game” approach to the tests and are focusing instead on what really matters – instruction. Increasingly, principals and teachers are weaving the content of the standards into creative lessons and experiences. They’re finding that this approach results in students who approach the tests with authentic confidence.

Several recent actions of the Board of Education also have contributed to the calming of “SOL fever,” especially among high school students facing Virginia’s new graduation requirements.

Beginning with students who entered the ninth grade during the 2000-01 school year, students must earn verified credits by passing end-of-course SOL tests. These students, and students in the two subsequent classes, may select four of the six tests they take to earn the six verified credits required for a Standard Diploma. This enables these students to lean on their strongest subjects.

## **Goal of Basic Literacy**

An array of career and technical examinations for licensure also may be used to earn these four verified credits. Students in this transition group must still pass the two high school English tests. After all, no student should be allowed to graduate unless he or she can demonstrate basic literacy.

A certain amount of stress always will attend annual testing. It is up to us as parents and educators not add to it. If we keep the focus on learning and instruction, the tests will tend to take care of themselves.

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